

LIVING IN THE INTERIM

Hugo Bouter

Living in the Interim

Serving Jesus during the night of His rejection here on earth



*Living in the Interim,
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“At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw [it], they said to Him: Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!

But He said to them: Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?

Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? But I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Matthew 12:1-8

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First we would like to consider the Lord's prayer 'at that time', as we find it at the end of Matthew 11. It was a remarkable giving of thanks that Jesus expressed in that crucial time.

Introduction

What do we mean by the expression *living in the interim*¹? It intimates that we, as Christians, live in the time between Christ's first coming to this earth, as a humble Man, and His coming again in power and glory². We live as strangers and pilgrims, following the rejected and crucified Lord, all the while waiting for His glorious return. The 'interim' is therefore the period of time between Pentecost and Parousia; between the descent of the Holy Spirit to gather the Church into one body and the coming of the Lord *for* His Church, followed by His appearing *with* all the saints.

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- 1 In this booklet the Interim stands for the era between Christ's first coming to this earth and His second coming. There are several things that are characteristic of the present dispensation, such as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer, the mystery of Christ and the Church, the truth of the rapture of the saints etc. In our passage in Matthew 11 and 12 the Lord does not touch upon these things, because it was still before the cross and the coming of the Holy Spirit.
 - 2 It may be useful for some readers to clarify: there will be no Christians on earth during the time between the rapture and the Lord's appearing in might and power, i.e. during the tribulation period (there will be saints in the tribulation period, but not Christians).

In the gospel of Matthew, the Lord Jesus presents Himself to the nation of Israel as their promised King. Sadly, His own people rejected Him, which becomes clear through the course of the gospel. In chapters 11 and 12 the great turning point occurs, and the Lord pronounces woes upon the Galilean cities that refused to repent in response to His preaching. The Lord would be arrested and put to death just like John the Baptist, the herald of the King.

The Kingdom of heaven would take on a new and hidden form during the time that the Lord Himself was absent, 'hidden' so to speak in the heavens (cf. Matt. 13; Col. 3:3).

We find the expression 'at that time' *twice* in these chapters in Matthew (Matt. 11:25; 12:1). Let us consider this short passage (Matt. 11:25 - 12:8), where the Lord connects His teaching on the Kingdom with some important instructions regarding:

- (a) Life during the interim between Christ's two advents, while He is still rejected.
- (b) Our present blessings flowing from the knowledge of the Father and the Son, as revealed by the Spirit.
- (c) The character of our service and our discipleship as followers of an absent and glorified Christ.
- (d) The great principles of the new dispensation.

Gouda, February 2014

H. Bouter

1. I Thank You, Father

'At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight.'

Matthew 11:25-26

1.1. Giving thanks to the Father

The Lord Jesus had come to His own people as the promised King, but (as John records) His own received Him not. Therefore, the King could not set up His Kingdom in its public form at that time. From then on He was the *Sower*, sowing the Word of God in the field of the world (cf. Matt. 13). Not until the end time, at Christ's return, will the Kingdom be established in power and glory. Israel will be the centre of the coming Kingdom of peace, where the Son of Man will sit upon the throne of His glory (Matt. 25:31).

However, here in Matthew 11, when Jesus addressed the Father with thanksgiving, that coming glory was still a long way off. In the preceding verses, He had pronounced "woes" upon the

Galilean cities where the majority of His miracles had been performed: Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. These cities had not repented even though they had witnessed the power of the Kingdom of heaven. There is no doubt that the Lord was disappointed about the lack of understanding of His own people, the fact that He was not recognized as their promised Messiah. Nevertheless, there was nothing that could disturb His inner peace. He laid it all in the hands of the Father, and could discern His wisdom.

God's plan included the fact that the leaders of the nation, the 'wise and prudent', had no eye for Christ's glory and would deliver Him up to be crucified. This pathway would indeed bring salvation to *the nations* as well. As the Son of the living God, Christ would begin to build His Church (Matt. 16:16-18), and it would consist of believers out of Israel as well as out of the Gentiles. This secret would be revealed to 'children'. Only believers, people that become as little children, can be led to the revelation of the Father through the Son. Together they form the new family of the redeemed, Gods household, the Church of the living God.

Jesus even began with a word of praise: 'I thank You, Father'. That is a lesson for us when we find ourselves in difficult circumstances. Perhaps you sometimes ask yourself: What is the purpose of my life and work? Is there anyone that understands and appreciates me? Yes, if you can call God your *Father* through faith in the finished work of Christ, you may know that there is One who completely understands you. Then you can also raise your voice in praise: 'I thank You, Father' (Matt. 11:25).

1.2. Lord of heaven and earth

Our heavenly Father knows what is good for us better than we do. Isn't He the Lord of heaven and earth? Doesn't He direct all things? Doesn't He have the whole world in His hands? Do not His eyes scan to and fro throughout the whole earth? This description of the Father as *the Lord of heaven and earth* reminds us of Abram's meeting with Melchizedek, which is mentioned in the first book of the Bible: an event of deep prophetic significance. At that time, God revealed Himself as the Creator (or: the Possessor) of heaven and earth. Melchizedek the priest came out to meet Abram with the words: 'Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth' (Gen. 14:18-20). God, who possesses heaven and earth, is the Most High. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. By and by in the end time, this will be visible to all.

However, to us who are the children of God, He is now in the first place our *Father*. This is how we should worship Him, because the Son has come to earth to declare Him and make Him known as our Father. By faith, we may bless His name, and very *personally* we may echo the words of Christ: 'I thank You, Father'. But we can also bless the Father *collectively*, in the Assembly of the redeemed. However, in some situations we must also reverently say, 'Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight' (Matt. 11:26). That is not an objection, nor is it a forced resignation, but a conscious *assent* to His holy will. May we also lay everything that befalls us, including all our disappointments, in the Father's hands. This is what Christ wants to teach us, so that we can share in the knowledge of the Father. The Son loves to reveal the Father to His disciples (Matt. 11:27).

There is only one condition that the Lord makes: we must become disciples, or followers of Him. We must come to Him and learn from Him. This is further illustrated in the figure of *bearing a yoke*.

In effect, it means that we acknowledge Him as our great Leader and Teacher, and walk the way together with Him. He alone is the Way to the Father. To walk the way with Him, under the yoke that He places upon us: that gives true rest. He is not a hard Master, because His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

1.3. For so it seemed good in Your sight

Christ was the Beloved of the Father, the One in whom He was well pleased. He was His joy as the eternal Son, but also as a Man here on earth. God found His delight in Him even before the foundation of the world (Prov. 8:30), but also *after* He became Man and had taken on the form of a Bondservant. In the gospel of Matthew we find a twofold witness of God the Father, that His Son was the Beloved, the Man in whom He was well pleased. Both at the opening of Christ's public ministry here on earth, and near the end, a voice from heaven declared: 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased' (Matt. 3:17; 17:5). In both of these situations, *He was distinguished from other men* (i.e., all others that John baptized, and men of God such as Moses and Elijah). That was necessary to show that Christ was absolutely *unique*. In addition to this, we find the witness of Isaiah in this gospel regarding the Servant of the Lord. The Lord Jesus was the chosen Servant, the Beloved in whom the LORD was well pleased (Isa. 42:1; Matt. 12:18). While the nation of Israel had failed to serve God, Christ came as the perfect Servant to fulfil God's good pleasure (Ps. 40:8 JND).

It is noteworthy that we find a similar expression in Matthew 11:26 (cf. the Darby translation: 'For thus it has been well-pleasing in Thy sight'), especially since this passage speaks about *the consequences of the rejection of the Messiah*. God not only knew

beforehand that His Servant would suffer and be rejected by Israel and the nations, but in that way of reproach, God's good pleasure would be fulfilled at the same time. The Servant of Jehovah, who had spent Himself in vain to re-gather Israel and bring Jacob back to Himself, would be given as *a light to the nations* (Isa. 49:4-6). God's salvation would extend to the ends of the earth.

God is well pleased to offer His salvation to all people, that is to say, to all who labour and are heavy laden and therefore seek refuge with Christ. The rejected Messiah thus becomes the object and centre of attraction to all that He would gather together in one. The first part of Matthew 11 clearly shows that the Lord Jesus – like John the Baptist – was rejected by the nation of Israel. Therefore, He had to pronounce judgment over the cities where He had laboured without fruit. However, as a proof of the perfect manhood of the Lord, we find not even a hint of protest concerning the path of rejection and humiliation that He had to go. On the contrary, He accepted the Father's will and in these difficult and disappointing circumstances could even praise Him (Matt. 11:25)!

The Lord had come to His own (i.e., the nation of Israel), but it became clear that His own would not receive Him (John 1:11). He accepted this as the will of the Father and willingly took the pathway of suffering, so that the salvation of God could reach *all peoples and nations*. It was 'at that time', namely the time in which He had pronounced 'woes' over the cities that had not repented, that He *thanked* the Father for hiding these things from the wise and prudent and revealing them to a rather insignificant remnant of the people (Matt. 11:25; 16:17). Those who had received Him are here described as 'little children' that knew the Father, and had an open ear for the things He wanted to reveal. This term illustrates firstly that they had *the faith of a child* and

were born again, and secondly it speaks of their own position of insignificance in contrast with the mighty leaders of the nation.

The Lord therefore accepted that the people of Israel had rejected their Messiah and that, as a consequence, the promised Kingdom was postponed. He did not take this as the work of human hands, but He received it as from His Father's hands: 'Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight' (Matt. 11:26). God's plans would be fulfilled via the cross and the resurrection. This was the way in which His purposes would be realized: the Church would be formed from believers both out of Israel and the nations. So the Church of the living God is being built now, while it is still the time of grace, on Christ the Rock, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16-18; 1 Tim. 3:15).

The establishment of the Kingdom was postponed for the time being, and it has taken on a hidden form in the time of the King's absence. This is described more fully in Matthew 13. We do not establish the Kingdom by force, for it has a *spiritual* nature and we as Christians have *spiritual* weapons (cf. Rom. 14:17; 2 Cor. 10:4). But in a future day, when the Church has been brought to glory, the Kingdom will be manifested in power and glory. Then the people of Israel will repent and bow to the anointed King, who comes in the name of the LORD (Matt. 23:39). God's plans cannot fail and the Lord Jesus will eventually receive the honour that He deserves, also from His earthly people Israel.

In this second chapter we see the great consequences of the Lord's rejection as the promised King. The Son now reveals the Father to all that come to Him by faith.

2. The Son reveals the Father

'All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.'

Matthew 11:27

2.1. All things have been delivered to Me

The Lord added still more to His thanksgiving, namely that *all things were delivered to Him* by the Father – although this seemed to be quite different. Through the people's rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, God purposed to give Him even *greater* glory. This thought is embodied in the words of the Lord: '*All things have been delivered to Me by My Father*' (Matt. 11:27). Christ is temporarily rejected as King on the holy hill of Zion, but He is glorified as the Son of Man at God's right hand – and that means that *all things* are put under His feet. See the citations from Psalm 8:6 in 1 Corinthians 15:27, Ephesians 1:22-23 and Hebrews 2:7-9.

In the gospel of John, the *love* of the Father for the Son is the motive displayed to make the Son the Centre of all things: 'The

Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand' (John 3:35). The passage in Matthew agrees with this, because there we read about God's *good pleasure* of which the Son is the Object. Here we sense something about the intimate relationship between the Father and the Son: '(...) and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son' (Matt. 11:27). Thankfully the verse does not end with these lofty words, but it continues: '(...) and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him'. Admittedly, Christ was rejected as the Messiah who came to His people, but now He has gathered together a circle of followers, a company of 'brethren', children of the Father.

Let us praise the Lord that through His work we now have learned the *Father's name*, and can worship the Father in spirit and truth! Christ Himself raises a song of praise in the midst of the Church, and He leads the song of thanksgiving and worship to the Father (Heb. 2:12). He had already declared the Father's name to His disciples here on earth (John 17:6, 26), but after His resurrection He led them into the reality of enjoying this new relationship (John 20:17). He is the Firstborn among many brethren (Rom. 8:29). He is the Head of a new generation, the family of God's children.

2.2. The knowledge of the Father and the Son

So we see that Matthew 11 also shows us the Son's ministry in the time of His rejection by His earthly people. The Messianic era is postponed, the time of refreshing and the restoration of all things will not dawn until Christ's return (Acts 3:19-21). But in the meantime, God has prepared a place for the rejected King at His own right hand in heaven, and His followers are a *heavenly* people, being joined to the Lord in heaven through the uniting

bond of the Holy Spirit. That is why the Lord explains that from henceforth things would centre on the revelation of the Father by the Son, on fellowship with the Father and the Son, on true rest for the heart and *not* on Messianic rule. Because the Son has revealed the Father to weary souls – sinners that come to Him confessing their guilt – they can have fellowship with God. Our fellowship is with the Father and the Son, and it is based on the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life in Christ. This is what gives us fullness of joy (1 John 1:1-4).

In the Old Testament, God dwelt in darkness, in the secret place of the sanctuary. He dwelt behind the veil, and no one could approach Him, with the exception of Moses and Aaron the high priest. Aaron could enter merely once a year, only on the great Day of Atonement. But by virtue of the suffering and death of Christ, there is now free access to God in the Holiest for every believer. The veil is rent, the heavens are opened (Heb. 10:19-22). We know God as our Father in Christ, and He has predestined us to sonship for Himself (Eph. 1:5). We are placed before Him holy and without blame in Christ. We rejoice in God's ways, in His counsels of eternal love and grace. We have fellowship with the Father and we know His loving heart. And we have fellowship with the Son and share in the good pleasure that the Father has found in His Beloved. The Father has given us to the Son, and we are inseparably joined to Him.

In the Old Testament, God was known as the one true God. But in the New Testament the living God reveals Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He has made Himself known in His essential being. The Son already revealed the Father during His life on earth, and He continues to set forth this revelation from heaven through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He was not only the King of Israel, but also *the Son of the Father*. We can only get to know

the Father through Him. He is the Way, for 'no one comes to the Father except through Me' (John 14:6).

This is how we find rest for our souls: through Christ we rest in the Father's love. God has become our *Father* in and through the Son; and now we are God's dear children, the many sons that He will bring to glory. We were bowed down under the yoke of our sins, which weighed us down even more through the law, which condemned and cursed us on account of our transgressions. But Christ has redeemed us, and He has delivered us from the curse of the law. As His followers, we need only to take on His *easy* yoke and *light* burden. We have an open heaven in view, since He is gone before us to prepare a place for His own in the Father's house.

In this third chapter we see another aspect of living in the interim between Christ's first and His second coming: we follow a rejected King and share in His sufferings.

3. We are followers of a rejected Lord

'Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.'

Matthew 11:28-30

3.1. Coming to Christ

The closing verses of Matthew 11 present a beautiful balance between divine election and the offer of free grace. First we see election according to the will of the Son: '(...) the one to whom the Son *wills* to reveal Him', that is, the *Father* (cf. chapter 2 of this booklet). However, the loving invitation follows for souls weary of their sins: '*Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*' (Matt. 11:27-28).

Christ's call reaches all those who are weary and heavy laden, all those who are seeking rest for their conscience. We all are invited

to come with the burden of our sins and guilt, of our hardships and worries and lay them at the feet of Jesus, who bore our sins on Calvary's cross. He has made *peace* through the blood of His cross (Col. 1:20).

When we thus find *peace* and *rest* in Him, we become His disciples and we learn from Him. We belong to Him, the rejected King; we walk with Him and take His yoke upon us. The figure of bearing a yoke is borrowed from farming. The Israelite was not permitted to yoke unequal animals together (Deut. 22:10; cf. 2 Cor. 6:14). In Matthew 11, the Lord uses the figure to teach us that the disciple must walk in step with the Master and become like Him. This is how we walk with Him, under the same yoke and learning from Him. We share in His reproach as well. He is gentle and lowly in heart, and He is waiting for the Father's appointed time to receive the Kingdom, which is rightly His. We are waiting with Him; we do not demand our 'rights', but bear the yoke that the Master has laid upon us. In the most difficult circumstances, we find rest for our souls and we go on our way rejoicing with His peace in our hearts, because His yoke is easy and His burden is light.

3.2. David became their captain

In connection with this, I would like to point out several parallels with the life and times of king David (see 1 Sam. 22:1-2). David did not receive his throne until a long time after Samuel anointed him as king. In this, he is a type of Christ, who has received the *right* to the throne – but His *kingship* is not yet exercised in a manifest way. Christ is still the rejected One. The world has cast Him out, and has lifted Him up on the cross. His own nation refused to accept Him. The Jews did not want Him to reign over them. But in the meantime, Christ is exalted to God's right hand in heaven, and

placed above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named (Eph. 1:20-22). He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords: this is His rightful place, but the power connected with it will not be shown until His second coming (Rev. 19:11-16).

When David had to flee because the time of his reign had not yet come, he became the centre and captain of a number of faithful followers. Likewise Christ, though still the rejected One, has those who are His own and are closely joined to Him. He is the Centre of all the disciples that He has chosen and has drawn to Himself (John 12:32). We find this foreshadowed in the life of David in First Samuel chapter 22. His brothers came to him at the cave of Adullam, but also everyone who was distressed, everyone who was in debt and everyone who was discontented. In the first category, we see a figure of those who know the Lord already, who know that He calls them His 'brethren' – because of His finished work of redemption (cf. Ps. 22:22; John 20:17). The second group was composed of those who were driven to David as a result of their need. Here we can see all those who hear the call of the Saviour, and respond to the loving invitation: *'Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'* (Matt. 11:28).

It is noteworthy that Christ is shown to be the Centre of all those who seek refuge with Him in the gospel of Matthew, the very same gospel that portrays Him as the rejected King. He still does have a number of followers, and to them He reveals the *Father's name*. He is not occupied with the assertion of His kingly rights, but He gathers a people out of Israel and out of the nations so that He can reveal to them the Father's name: 'No one knows the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him' (Matt. 11:27; cf. John 17:6, 26). This is the work of His

grace, which is now being accomplished by the Holy Spirit whom He has sent to this earth. The Spirit reveals to us the glory of the Father and the Son, and He unites us as God's children around Christ the Lord. We see in Matthew 18:20 that the Lord is the divine Centre of His followers, who are gathered to His name. We form a people separate from the world, a heavenly company, a family of priests. We rest in God's presence and we bow down collectively in worship before God and the Lamb.

Just as David was not only the *centre* of his followers, but also their *captain*, our Lord and Saviour is not merely the *Centre* but also the *Leader* of all those who belong to Him (cf. Heb. 12:2 JND). From our dwelling place in His presence, we proceed to go out for His name's sake. Being with Him is the preparation needed for our task as sent by Him in the world. Concerning the disciples, it is written that Christ called them: (1) to be with Him, and (2) that He might send them out to preach (Mark 3:14). David became the captain, and commander of all that took refuge with him. Likewise, Christ is not only the Saviour, but also the *Lord* and *Master* of all who come to Him. He has authority over us, and He wants to lead us in the battles we must fight for His name.

The disciples, who had been with the Lord, became courageous heroes and brave witnesses of Him. Their enemies had to admit that 'they had been with Jesus' (Acts 4:13). Living in the presence of the Lord had left a clear stamp on them, and prepared them for the spiritual battle that they had to carry on. The followers of David learned from *him* and so they were transformed from disheartened people into courageous *heroes*. This is what happens to all those who take refuge with Christ in their cares and difficulties. As His learners we are changed into His image, and in our battles we go from strength to strength. We form His 'army' down here, sent forth by the glorified Lord, who has overcome

the evil one and defeated him with his own sword. We fight our *spiritual* battles in His strength and gain the victory to the honour of Him who has slain His ten thousands. Yes, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Rom. 8:37).

We read about David's heroes elsewhere that they came to him day by day to help him, until it was a great army, like the army of God (1 Chr. 12:22). They were valiant as lions, and swift as gazelles on the mountains. They submitted to David's authority and helped him to obtain his kingdom (1 Chr. 11:10). They were the first ones to put themselves under David's authority, even though his reign over Israel had not yet been established. They were also instrumental in causing his authority to be recognized amongst God's people and the surrounding nations.

Applying this to ourselves, we belong to the number of Christ's heroes when we submit to the authority that belongs to Him, even now in the time of His rejection, and contend for the honour of His name. He wants to guide us as our Lord, by means of His Word and by the Spirit of God, although the time of His public reign has not yet come. Do we follow this heavenly Lord?

In this fourth chapter we see the privileges that we enjoy as believers because we have been joined to a rejected Lord, who has taken His place at God's right hand in heaven. David also enjoyed special privileges in the time of his rejection. That is the example we will consider now. Have you not read what David did?

4. Have you not read what David did?

'At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" Then He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?"'

Matthew 12:1-4

4.1. The liberty by which Christ has made us free

Is that allowed: plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath? The Pharisees wanted to forbid the Lord's disciples to eat standing grain from the fields, but He defended their actions by pointing to an event from David's life.

In the first place, this shows us how highly our Lord regarded the Hebrew Scriptures. Christ allowed God's Word to lead Him in all things. This is what He lived by, and this is the standard that He held others to as well. Christ relied on the Scriptures, as He did on other occasions where it is mentioned: 'Have you not read (...)?' In other words, the Pharisees could have known better if they had read their Bibles more carefully! Paul reproaches the Galatians, who were also legally minded, in a similar way: 'You who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?' (Gal. 4:21). They could have overcome their problem if they had paid more attention to the law and had taken the lessons of Scripture to heart. As Christ's disciples, we can stand in the liberty by which He has made us free (Gal. 5:1).

Secondly, it is important to notice that the Lord compared Himself to His forefather, king David. He drew a parallel between David and his men on the one hand, and Himself with His followers on the other. This is not a coincidence, since in the previous chapter He was portrayed as the rejected Messiah (see Matt. 11:16-25). David had likewise followed a pathway of reproach and suffering, when he fled from Saul and sought refuge in the sanctuary at Nob (cf. Matt. 12:3-4 with 1 Sam. 21). Even though David was the Lord's anointed, his way to the throne was long and wearying. In his pathway of suffering he is a striking type of the suffering Servant of the LORD, and in his followers we see an image of Christ's disciples who followed Him in His sufferings.

4.2. The food of the sanctuary

David took care of his valiant men, and so Christ takes care of those who belong to Him. David entered the house of God and ate the showbread there, as well as those who were with him. That was

the liberty wherein they stood; and it is a beautiful illustration of *Christian liberty* today. The Lord gives us a place in the heavenly sanctuary during the time of His rejection; and there we possess a priestly portion and a priestly position (cf. Heb. 10:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 1:6).

What David and his men did, was actually reserved for the priests. Every Sabbath fresh showbread was placed on the table in the tabernacle and then the priests ate the bread that had been for a week on the table for the showbread, in a holy place (Lev. 24:5-9). It was *priestly* food, the food of the *holy place*. These loaves, covered with pure frankincense, represented the twelve tribes of Israel. When God saw these loaves, He thought of His people and could look upon them with favour. Likewise, God now looks upon His children with delight, because in Christ we are holy and without blame before Him, accepted in the Beloved (Eph. 1:3-6). Just as the table bore the showbread in the holy place, so Christ bears us as a heavenly people in God's presence. In Him we are holy, and kept safely as beloved children of God. Wonderful truth! As a holy priesthood, we should feed on the great truth of what we are in Christ before God, as united with Him who was rejected on the earth but exalted by God to His right hand in heaven.

This is the example that Christ used to defend the actions of His disciples. They were free to eat the heads of grain on the Sabbath, just as the men that accompanied David had the liberty – very likely also on a Sabbath – to eat the consecrated food of the sanctuary. But there is a difference: the heads of grain were not a complete loaf, although they formed the basis of it. The heads of grain remind us of the *life* that is brought forth out of the death of Christ, the fruitful Grain of Wheat falling into the ground and dying (John 12:24-25). He is the Firstborn from among the dead, and we are raised to life *with Him*. His life is true food for our

souls, as we enjoy the liberty – that the law of Moses did not and could not give – to feed on this new life in Christ, real resurrection life.

4.3. The sword of the sanctuary



By: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1573-1610).
Art historic museum Vienna.

Not only did David take the *food*, but also the *weapon* that was found in the holy place: the sword of the Philistine Goliath (1 Sam. 21:9). Although the Lord Jesus does not allude to it any further in Matthew 12, I think we can learn another lesson from David's stay in Nob. After all, it is not only food that sustains the new life, but we also need a weapon to engage with the enemy in battle. It is the weapon of the holy place, a weapon without equal! It is something that completely answers to God's requirements of righteousness and holiness.

What does this weapon represent to us? It was David's trophy, the sword that he deprived Goliath of, having slain him with it (1 Sam. 17:51, 54). It had been the Philistine's weapon, but now it belonged to David. In the same way Christ has defeated Satan,

who *had* the power of death. Death and the grave were the weapons of this mighty adversary (Heb. 2:14). How did our Lord deliver the deathblow to him? He has done it by entering into death Himself, thus defeating the devil with his own armaments. From now on, the power over death is in the hands of the risen Lord, who holds the keys of Hades and of Death (Rev. 1:18).

But in the spiritual application, Christ allows us to share in the results of His victory and He also gives us this weapon in hand – just as David’s men were safe behind the sword that he wielded. For we always carry about in the body the *dying* of the Lord Jesus, that the *life* of Jesus also may be manifest in our body (2 Cor. 4:10). Since we have died with Christ, our members which are on the earth – where the power of the enemy is still active – must be put to death (Col. 3:5). On the one hand therefore, we need *food* to sustain the new life, but on the other hand we need a mighty *weapon* to put to death the works of the flesh. It is good to know that our Lord as the true David provides for both of these important needs!

To complete our study, we see in this last chapter the rich blessings that we possess as Christians, but also the great responsibilities that go along with living in the time between Christ's coming in humiliation and His second coming. It's all about the five principles of the new dispensation.

5. The five principles of the new dispensation

'Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.'

Matthew 12:5-8

5.1. The new priesthood

The first eight verses of Matthew 12 contain five principles or rules of conduct for us as Christians in this dispensation, whilst the Lord is *rejected* by the people of Israel – just as His forerunner John the Baptist was rejected earlier (see the connection with Matthew 11).

Let us now consider the ensuing principles, the first one having been discussed previously in chapter 4 of this booklet. To review

it briefly: Jesus and His followers serve as *priests* in the heavenly sanctuary during the time of His rejection, just as David and his mighty men entered God's house and ate the showbread (1 Sam. 21:1-9; Matt. 12:3-4). In Matthew 12 we read about the eating of *heads of grain*, which are a type of the Lord Himself in His resurrection from among the dead (John 12:24; 1 Cor. 15:20, 23).

The believers that belong to the Church have a *heavenly* calling. We have boldness to enter into the Holiest by the blood of Jesus. We also have a High Priest over the house of God (Heb. 10:21). The Holiest is our 'refuge' and in God's presence we are to feed on Christ, the risen and glorified Lord. He is the food of the sanctuary. The showbread also speaks of the heavenly position of the Church. The twelve loaves symbolize God's people, accepted in Christ and maintained by Him in God's presence.

5.2. The new perspective: God's own rest

In Matthew 12:5 we find the Lord touching on a theme that we sometimes refer to as 'the priesthood of all believers'. Again, He compares the disciples to priests, who would serve in the sanctuary even on the Sabbath. The priests would carry out their duties and profane the Sabbath, but still be blameless. After all, it was God's will that extra sacrifices should be offered on the Sabbath – over and above the regular burnt offerings (Num. 28:9-10). Even though the priests in the temple worked on the Sabbath, they could calmly fulfil their duties. In the same way the disciples of our Lord were *guiltless* when they plucked and ate heads of grain on the Sabbath, as long as they did not transgress *His* commandments.

This is an indication that the Sabbath laws do not apply in the present dispensation. At the outset of Christendom, there was

intense debate about the question whether believers from among the Gentiles had to be subject to the law of Moses. But then it was determined once and for all that they did *not* need to bear this yoke (Acts 15:1-29). But there is also a spiritual application to be made. We enjoy a Sabbath rest, in that we 'rest' from living in sin. For we are dead to sin, and alive to God. And we walk in *newness* of life. The rest of the *new creation* supersedes the original Sabbath rest of the Garden of Eden, which was disrupted by sin.

And secondly, we are *priests* and it is our privilege to enter the Holiest 'on the Sabbath'. That is to say, we enter into God's presence by the Spirit and enjoy His rest on the basis of Christ's finished work (Heb. 4:8-11). We have peace *with* God, and we also enjoy the peace *of* God (Rom. 5:1; Phil. 4:7). The Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God is also a prophetic reference to the coming rest during Christ's millennial reign.

5.3. The new temple service

The *third* principle is also very important. The Jewish temple service is superseded by Christian worship, which is not limited to a particular time or place. We worship the Father in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). We may *continually* offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name (Heb. 13:15).

Since He is God and Man in one Person, Christ could say of Himself: 'One greater than the temple is here' (Matt. 12:6). He was also greater than *Solomon*, who built the temple (Matt. 12:42). All the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him bodily (John 2:21; Col. 2:9). The temple of His body also speaks of the *Church*, which in this dispensation is His 'body' here on earth, a habitation of God

in the Spirit (Eph. 2:20-22). This supersedes any earthly temple, made with *hands*.

5.4. The new guideline: showing mercy

The *fourth* tenet of the new dispensation is: 'I desire *mercy* and not sacrifice' (Matt. 12:7a). Legalism always leads to the condemnation of the *guiltless* (Matt. 12:7b). After all, to the pure *all* things are pure (Tit. 1:15). A judgmental attitude towards others most often goes along with the self-importance of so-called religious leaders and their claims. We see this in the gospels too (cf. Luke 18:9-14).

This word of our Lord about the need of showing mercy is a quote from the prophet Hosea: 'For I desire *mercy* and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings' (Hos. 6:6). The Lord also quoted it when He called the tax collector Matthew (Matt. 9:13). Christ did not come to call the righteous, but *sinners*, to repentance.

We also ought to show mercy towards the people in our surroundings, because it is still the day of grace. We may observe all kinds of rules outwardly and bring the prescribed sacrifices, just as the pious Jews did. However, this is without value for God *if it is not done with an attitude of true love, compassion and mercy*.

5.5. The new King: Jesus is Lord

The Lord Jesus spoke with greater authority than *Moses*, the lawgiver who led the Israelites out of Egypt (cf. Heb. 3:3). He laid down yet another principle in His confrontation with the Pharisees, a rule that is a *prophecy* as well. For the Son of Man

is Lord even of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8). *Jesus is Lord!* This also is the witness of the apostles in the book of Acts, and those who opposed them realized they had been with Jesus (Acts 2:36; 4:13; 5:31; 10:36; 17:7).

The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. He is our Lord and Saviour, and *He* sets forth the rules for our conduct as believers – Christian guidelines that we can find in detail throughout the rest of the New Testament.

The fact that the Son of Man is *Lord of the Sabbath*, is at the same time a reference to the coming millennial Kingdom, when every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is *Lord*, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10-11). He is Lord of all, the Heir of all things (Acts 10:36; Eph. 1:22). He will appear in majesty at His second coming, and then a true Sabbath rest will dawn upon God's people and the whole creation. What a glorious prospect!

